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Bridge of Courage by Jennifer Harbury

Bridge of Courage is a book comprised of various stories from guerilla fighters in Guatemala. The author, Jennifer Harbury, was married to Efraim Bamanca Velasquez, a Mayan (A native people in Guatemala). Velasquez was a guerilla leader declared missing in 1992, and only through the work of his wife was it discovered that the CIA had covered up his murder at the hands of the Guatemalan army, as to which the U.S. had provided aid. The eventual result of this discovery was the declassification of many documents related to crimes committed by the Guatemalan military onto the Mayan people. In 1998, Bill Clinton issued a formal apology to Guatemala for covering this information, which contained documents dating back until 1954.

The book itself is entirely made up of stories told from the native Mayan or ladino (mixed heritage) perspective during the Guatemalan Civil War. The Guatemalan government committed true genocide onto their indigenous peoples, in a war that lasted from 1960 to 1996. Over 200,000 natives are estimated to have died or gone missing. These stories, transcribed from 1985-1990, and taking place mostly from the late 1970s to the early 1980s, are often scarring and disconcerting tales of the 'companeros' attempting to survive the brutality of the Guatemalan military threat.

Many of the stories recount people who either went up to the mountains to fight, or saw loved ones do so, or take political action in other ways. A very frequently occurring situation throughout the stories is the personal account of those who saw their family and friends abducted and murdered by the military. The revolutionaries attempted to rebel often through completely peaceful means, however anyone who spoke out against the government in any manner faced that risk. The severity of the poverty in these areas was only perpetuated by the genocide, and those who managed to become educated or have political effect were personally sought out as enemies of the government. There was a large underground system of revolutionaries, related to URNG, or the Guatemalan National Recovery Union, an alliance of several revolutionary organizations. As many stories of pain and loss that are in this book, there are also a good amount of small victories for the underground. The book is divided into sections based on the time period or attitude of the stories; those who found reasons to join the revolution, the early stages of the revolution, present-day Guatemala, and projects that can help create change.

I personally found this book to be very eye-opening and engaging. As opposed to a textbook description of this war, there could be no better format than very personal stories from the victims of the genocide. The way the subjects talk about finding barely recognizable corpses outside their churches, or having the only remnants of their husband be a mangled brain, it's almost difficult to digest or believe at some points that this was a reality they lived through. However the nature

of the writing, which feels very verbal, as though directly transcribed with detail from the storytellers, creates a level of honesty from these people that is impossible to overlook.